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# "The compass of possibilities": Re-Mapping the Suburbs of Los Angeles in the Writings of D.J. Waldie

Neil Campbell

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The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.  
(Pallasmaa 40)

Every map is a fiction. Every map offers choices.  
(Waldie, *Holy* 47)

## 1. A "landscape people rarely notice"

- 1 In recent work on the American New West much attention has been paid to changing geographies, economies, and cultures of the region, and yet one area that has been under-examined is suburbia. For so often derided as a blight on the landscape or as the outward manifestation of a post-war containment culture, the suburbs were usually, as Robert Beuka has pointed out, either seen as utopian or, increasingly in the post 1945 USA, as dystopian:

the grid of identical houses on identical lots, the smoking barbecues, the swimming pool – loaded signifiers that, taken together, connote both the middle-class "American Dream" ... and that dream's inverse: the vision of a homogenized, soulless, plastic landscape of tepid conformity, an alienating "noplacé." (Beuka 4)

- 2 One precise example of this type of approach to the suburbs is writ large in westerner Ken Kesey's Oregon-set novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) in which the world of the machine-like Combine that epitomises the post-war consensus as a totalitarian disciplinary power structure is manifested in the suburban housing described as:

... five thousand houses punched out identical by a machine and strung across the hills outside of town, so fresh from the factory they're still linked together like sausages ... The houses looked so much alike that, time and time again, the kids

went home by mistake to different houses and different families. Nobody ever noticed. (Kesey 225-26)

- 3 Of course, as Beuka goes on to say, such extremes do not reflect accurately the actual experience of suburban life, which was as varied as those who lived there. He proposes to overcome this binary way of thinking about the suburbs by adopting the term "heterotopia" derived from the work of Michel Foucault, meaning a "kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" and yet remain, "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 22-27, 24). Using Foucault, as Beuka does, to reject the purely utopic or dystopic views of suburbia, allows in a sense of place as always more complex and multiplicitous, a layered space reflecting the culture at large, and, as I will argue in relation to D.J. Waldie's work in this essay, beyond this to the world itself.
- 4 In addition to the prejudices against suburbanism as a legitimate focus for study, there has been a similar and related disdain for regionalism best summed up by Lucy Lippard's comments:

Today the term regionalism ... continues to be used pejoratively, to mean corny backwater art flowing from tributaries that might eventually reach the mainstream but is currently stagnating out there in the boondocks. (Lippard 36)
- 5 However, as I shall argue, regionalism can be *critical* too, interrogating the local and proximate precisely in order to demonstrate its universality, its connectedness, *and* its differences with the wider world. As Lippard puts it, "Good regional art has both roots and reach" (Lippard 37).
- 6 D.J. Waldie, author of *Holy Land* (1996) and *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles* (2004), claims suburbia is a "landscape people rarely notice" and then proceeds to present a mosaic of episodes made up of memoirs, gathered stories, observations and other fragments that demonstrate precisely why it is worth noticing and how its multiple narratives, when looked at from the ground up, enmesh us into not just local, but national and international histories (*Holy* 154). To this end, I would argue, Waldie stands at the forefront of an *expanded* or *reframed* critical regionalism that builds upon a definition provided by Douglas Reichert Powell who sees it as a "strategy for cultural critique" that links

individual moments of cultural struggle to larger patterns of history, politics, and culture, by understanding how they are linked not only in time and in the nebulous networks of discourse, but also in space, through relationships of power that can be material and cultural. (Powell 20-21)
- 7 With this in mind, the purpose of this essay is to reframe Waldie's *Holy Land* as critical regionalism and through this to claim suburbia as a vital element in the field, and specifically a fundamental constituent in the reconfiguration of American Western Studies as at the very heart of the ongoing development and expansion of critical regionalist studies.

## 2. "Memory and narrative": Reframing Critical Regionalism

- 8 The term "critical regionalism" is most commonly associated with architectural critic Kenneth Frampton as a project that refutes conservative populism and sentimental

regionalism in order to assert "the hallmark of ambiguity" as a means of mediating the impact of "universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place" (Frampton, "Towards" 21). This latter idea, like the term Critical Regionalism itself, is borrowed from Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis who first coined the term in 1981 (see Lefaivre and Tzonis). Imbued with "critical self-consciousness" their approach is not interested in reviving "a lost vernacular" with its echoes of compensatory idealism, but functions through what Frampton calls "double mediation" – "to 'deconstruct' the overall spectrum of world culture which it inevitably inherits" and "to achieve through synthetic contradiction, a manifest critique of universal civilization." His architectural examples "mediate" between styles forming "conjunctions" of "rationality" and "arationality," the "regular grid" and "idiosyncratic form," standardised concrete and extravagant "patent glazing," and most clearly between the inside and the outside. The architecture exudes "multiple cross-cultural references" and as with all these elements, constitutes a form of new regionalism that might indeed be "potentially liberative in and of itself since it opens the user to manifold *experiences*" (Frampton, "Towards" 20, 21, 22, 23, 25; italics in original).

- 9 Although uneven in its expression, Frampton desires "the dialectical interplay between [universal] civilization and [local] culture" and asserts that this might happen through "double mediation" and "interaction" whereby modern, universalization is constantly interrupted and unsettled by what he usefully terms "*a revealed conjunction between*" (Frampton, "Towards" 17, 21, 22; emphasis added). The "conjunctural" denies the assertion of hierarchical order, of the dominant, universal form over the regional, and instead finds effective ways to "mediate" *between* and *across* forms. This conjunctural process Frampton calls "in-laying" or "layering" whereby the site "has many levels of significance ... the prehistory of the place, its archaeological past and its subsequent cultivation and transformation across time," displaying all the "idiosyncrasies of place ... without falling into sentimentality" (Frampton, "Towards" 21, 26). In these points, Frampton presents a radical vision of "critical regional" space as complex, layered, and multiple, a palimpsest comprising past, present and future that opposes any effort to reduce or limit its capacity through narrow definition or "rootedness." As I will show throughout this essay D.J. Waldie's approach to the suburban landscape of Lakewood has just such a layered, "conjunctural" emphasis, both interested in the past and the community dreams of post-war culture, but never nostalgic and reductive in his attitude to its continuation and evolution as urban space.
- 10 In America, one key figure in comprehending a reframed critical regionalism is Lewis Mumford who Lefaivre and Tzonis single out, alongside John Brinckerhoff Jackson, as the two most significant influences in their developing theories. In particular, Mumford's *The South in Architecture* (1941), articulated regions as complex contact zones whose many over-lapping elements were all to be considered as crucial to the dynamic formations of space and place:

[E]very regional culture necessarily has a universal side to it. It is steadily open to influences that come from other parts of the world, and from other cultures, separated from the local region in space or time or both together. It would be useful if we formed the habit of never using the word regional without mentally adding to it the idea of the universal – remembering the constant contact and interchange between the local scene and the wide world that lies beyond it. To make the best use of local resources, we must often seek help from people or ideas or technical methods that originate elsewhere ... As with a human being, every culture must

both be itself and transcend itself; it must make most of its limitations and must pass beyond them; it must be open to fresh experience and yet it must maintain its integrity. (Mumford qtd. in Lefavre and Tzonis 38-39)

- 11 This sets out very clearly the characteristics of critical regionalism as an approach to place and space whereby the local is no longer self-enclosed but has a profound relationship with an "outside"; a "constant contact and interchange" with "the wide world that lies beyond it," so that in drawing out knowledge of that local scene one might indeed, "be open to fresh experience and yet ... maintain its integrity."
- 12 In specifically Western terms, it was Edward Soja, writing in his 1989 work *Postmodern Geographies*, who called for "critical regional studies" with the potential to open up whole new knowledges derived from the "local" and based on approaches that were flexible and willing to "try new combinations of ideas rather than fall back to old categorical dualities" (Soja, *Postmodern* 189). He explored this, as Waldie has done, by examining the city of Los Angeles; the epitome of what Soja terms the "regionality of cityspace" (Soja, *Postmetropolis* 16). Other western critics took up the challenge of "new regionalism," such as Krista Comer in her *Landscapes of the New West* (1999), seeing it as engaged with modernism and postmodernism in a variety of critical dialogues which she has developed in her later work, where she claims, regionalist practices, such as literature, perform the "role as a kind of 'under' literature – under the sign of the nation, subsumed within or by 'larger,' more central, or seemingly efficacious discursive fields." However, Comer wants to innovate "the category and analytic practice of regionalism" so that it does not simply reinforce the nation-state's values or earlier nostalgic modes, but may, indeed open up, as Mumford had hoped, "more postnational and transnational" perspectives. In order for this to happen, Comer believes it is vital that American regional studies "goes global," and reckons with and displaces "the centrality of the nation-state in accounts of US cultural production" (Comer, "Taking Feminism" 112-13).
- 13 What Comer begins to chart in her latest work is an updated version of Critical Regionalism applied to the field of cultural studies, whereby the "radical" potential of "region" is employed to interrogate universalised norms and assumptions through asserting "constant contact and interchange between the local scene and the wide world that lies beyond it." As she asks specifically about Western Studies, "what if 'the West' were *not* about America" – that is, if its narratives were not always telling the nation's story (Manifest Destiny, progress, rugged individualism, frontier, entrepreneurialism etc.) and endlessly re-fetishizing the national imaginary as exceptionalist, but were read differently, across traditions, to tell complex, multiple stories and to redraw that region's political maps? Again, as Comer puts it, echoing Lefavre and Tzonis, "suppose that critics *reframed regionalism*," and her example is to think of the American Southwest as signifying Greater Mexico, therefore, undermining established "national" boundaries with "transnational" gestures and connections (Comer, "Taking Feminism" 114).

### 3. D.J. Waldie's *Expanded* Critical Regionalism

- 14 Waldie's key work *Holy Land* wants to tell of the ordinary lives of suburban America; of Lakewood, California, from the boom times of the post-war world through to the present. To tell this ordinary story, however, demands an extraordinary text – perhaps "palimpsestuous," to borrow a term coined of Gerard Genette's theoretical approach to literary texts, in the way that it moves between forms, shifting in and out of memoir,

cultural geography, urban history, sociology, religion, and perhaps even fiction (Genette ix). Photographic, prosaic, and poetic, its many layers of form and content present, explore, and circulate around the structures of deep feeling and history that delineate this suburban region of Lakewood, California. Its narrative equally shifting self-reflexively from third to first person, interweaving historical and affective elements across the landscape Waldie knows so well. "What more can you expect of me than the stories I am now telling?" he writes, and it is through these stories that he unravels a critical regionalist methodology – although, of course, he would never acknowledge it as such (*Holy* 13); an approach that echoes precisely that of Michel Foucault's notion of *genealogy*: "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories" (*Power/Knowledge* 3) in which "subjugated" suburban stories find their voice – giving "attention" to

local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge. (*Power/Knowledge* 83)

- 15 As a public official working for Lakewood, Waldie has lived in the area all his life, occupying the same house his parents bought in the 1940s. As a man with failing eyesight due to glaucoma and so unable to drive, Waldie walks the streets of Lakewood noticing its details and quirks, its lines of demarcation and celebration, hearing the voices of the dead and the living echoing through what Foucault terms its "insurrection of knowledges" (*Power/Knowledge* 84). Thus *Holy Land* juxtaposes tales of land and identity, cross-cutting, like the suburban grid it examines, between historical figures and Waldie's neighbours, childhood memories and religious rituals, his real father, the city Fathers, and the Holy Father. Hence Waldie can move seamlessly between stories of Mr H and his fallout shelter built under his garage or Mrs R's dead baby baptized by Waldie's mother in the street, to the implications of geological shifts and water politics in LA, to the racial restrictions on home ownership in the post-war USA.
  
- 16 But often, these are unnoticed and unremarked narratives, the micro-narratives of place, the everyday or ordinary histories of a suburban region more often than not criticized with sweeping and dismissive statements as we have seen. As poet-historian of West Coast suburbia, like the "proowler" that Michel De Certeau says all historians must be, Waldie is working in the margins, in the "zones of silence" (De Certeau, *Writing* 79), constructing a version of place akin to De Certeau's – "composed by a series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers" (De Certeau, *Practice* 108); a space of memories, "haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not," since, after all, "Haunted places are the only ones people can live in ..." (De Certeau, *Practice* 108). Lakewood's many voices, its ghosts, both personal and public echo through Waldie's fragments: his dead parents that are summoned up through the stories he recalls about their lives and his living with them; his neighbours across the years from the primarily white demographic of the post-war years to its increasingly multicultural make-up in the twenty-first century; the founding boosters, and further back, the Spanish gentry who gave life to the Los Angeles area; and the dead soldiers memorialized on the plaque Waldie replaces in Lakewood. All these voices pass through the book, like "the ghosts of repetition that haunt ... with ever greater frequency," as Sebald puts in *The Rings of Saturn* (187), all filtered through what Waldie terms his "Catholic imagination." Indeed, Waldie's Catholicism engenders a particular sensibility toward these spectral voices since, according to writer and priest Andrew Greeley, such an imagination is defined as an

inclination "to see the Holy lurking in creation," by existing in an everyday world "haunted by a sense that objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of Grace" (qtd. in Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 60).

- 17 Waldie constructs, therefore, a "deep history" of Lakewood, a multifaceted document of identity and landscape, "a meditation on the fate of ordinary things – the things we touch and the lingering effects of their touch on us" (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 61). Of course, as Waldie points out, the "touch" of the suburbs is conventionally met with horror in Western Studies through hideous images of Sprawl, social breakdown, or the debilitating effects of its perceived uniformity and cultural containment. Yet, without denying these as consequences of suburban development and economic and social change, Lakewood has the capacity to be also a "Holy Land" for Waldie, "an enchanted island" (*Holy* 13), since, "behind even the ugliest phenomena – even suburban sprawl, in my case – there is a supernatural force at work" ("Ordinary Time" 61).
- 18 Waldie establishes his anti-mythographic, non-conventional reading of suburbia and in so doing, his credentials as a critical regionalist, through commenting upon a series of significant motifs that have defined suburbia: maps and aerial photography, the grid, and the "national mythology" of despair found in the works of writers like Mike Davis, Peter Blake, and James Howard Kunstler. Through examining these in turn I will demonstrate the powerful cultural significance of Waldie's writings for a new phase in Western critical regionalist writing.

#### 4. "Lives ... placed side by side"

- 19 The ubiquitous aerial photographs of suburbia associated with any textbook on urban design epitomise for Waldie a terrible remoteness from the subject, a particular point of view reinforcing a series of judgements and ideologies that distance us from that sense of "touch" discussed earlier:  

a brilliant young photographer named William A. Garnett, working for the Lakewood Park corporation, took a series of aerial photographs in 1950 that look down on the vulnerable wood frames of the houses the company was putting up at the rate of five hundred a week. Even after fifty years, those *beautiful and terrible photographs* are used to indict suburbia. (Waldie, "An Ordinary Place" 3; my emphasis)
- 20 As Waldie adds, there is a fundamental problem with such images: "you can't see the intersection of character and place from an altitude of five hundred feet, and Garnett never came back to experience everyday life on the ground" (Waldie, "An Ordinary Place" 3). Juhani Pallasmaa also discusses how the city has been over burdened by the visual, by "rapid motorised movement," and "through the overall aerial grasp from an airplane." For him, as for Waldie, this enforces "the idealising and disembodied Cartesian eye of control and detachment ... *le regard surplombant* (the look from above) ..." (Pallasmaa 29). The "long distance vision" implied here is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as "striated space" in contrast to what, I would argue, Waldie is more concerned with, which is "close vision-haptic space" or "smooth space" (*Thousand Plateaus* 492-99).
- 21 Indeed, to return to Waldie's comment on Garnett's aerial photography, one is struck by the phrase "life on the ground" as it reinforces this sense of "touch" and the "close vision" as well as reminding us of De Certeau's essay "Walking in the City" in which he too notes the tension between the "theoretical," "geometrical" and "panoptic" city seen



from above, and what he terms "another spatiality" generated down below – "anthropological," poetic and mythic" (De Certeau, *Practice* 93). For Waldie, it is this latter sense of spatiality that concerns him, one which sees beyond the aerial view and its gridded imagery that literally and metaphorically "looks down" on suburbia, to a view made up of the human and the material landscape and their "joining of interests" (*Holy* 6). For only then might you notice the "house frames precise as cells in a hive and stucco walls fragile as an unearthed bone" as well as the variety and intensity of living that goes on within them (*Holy* 5). Through these organic, breathing images of cells, hives, bones, and experiences Waldie creates his phenomenological, affective landscape vision "like the illustration of a fold of skin in a high school biology book" (*Holy* 125), never static or dead but always already engaged in the multiple processes of embodied living in the world. As he has written elsewhere, "It's only the skin I won't slough off, the story I want to hear told, my carnal house and the body into which I welcome myself" (Waldie, *Where* 108).

22 *Holy Land* is no ordinary mapping of place, for as he writes, "Every map is a fiction. Every map offers choices" (*Holy* 47). He chooses to divulge genealogical histories in Foucault's sense, building layer on layer; conjunctural, evolutionary, and unfinished. But at the same time, there is a "sacramental extension" in Waldie's view wherein the everyday life of the suburbs "touches" him and might be mistaken for God's touch as well (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 61). Remember Waldie emphasises "the things we touch and the lingering effects of their touch on us," a type of "embodied vision that is an incarnate part of the 'flesh of the world'" (Pallasmaa 20), with our bodies existing alongside and interpenetrating the other objects of the world – a transubstantiation of the "body" of the suburb, like an act of communion, an "incarnate relation," into the human (Pallasmaa 27). Through his "Catholic Imagination" Waldie charts a sense of community based, he argues, like faith, upon "the sympathetic bond between strangers who might be neighbors," finding a parallel between his struggle for faith and his efforts to live a good, civic life because both have at their heart a common goal based on "habits of being"; to "trust one another and to be faithful ... to form communities and breed in them" (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 62).

23 For this to happen he resists those remote practices that create a space of "distance and exteriority" in favour of a "haptic city of interiority and nearness" that reconnects with a fuller, more human relationship with social and cultural life, one in which "Trust, vulnerability, and a capacity for stories" are required (Pallasmaa 33; Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 62). Unfortunately, Waldie sees too many examples of "remote control" attitudes embedded in what he calls a "national mythology" refuting the ordinary lives of suburban spaces like Lakewood, where "The necessary illusion is predictability" (*Holy* 2). However, his writing goes beyond this convenient illusion, this myth:

the national mythology is [suburbia] never works. The national mythology is not always right. I'm very skeptical of an American ethos which is driven by the remote control. Don't like you – click. Don't like that – click. Don't like this – click. I don't see life that way. [Lakewood's] not perfect, not right, not the best thing; it's just a sense of myself that I find more satisfying than the clicker or the remote control alternative. (Waldie, "15 Minutes" 9)

24 Waldie's affective re-mapping is based on cutting through this "national mythology" of "remote control" so as to reclaim disregarded experiences and express the "imaginative apprehension of the immanent in the everyday" through his commitment to "the human-scale, porous, and specific landscape" of suburbia (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 62). As he writes,



*Holy Land* is an argument. It's an argument about disregarding places, and it's an argument about why a disregarded place, an ordinary place, an everyday place, why it can in fact harbor qualities of life that are profound. ("15 Minutes" 8)

- 25 For Waldie, "Beyond the anonymity [of Lakewood] is a whole life" (*Holy* vi) and its "disregarded" stories become a vehicle through which he uncovers a deep history of people, place and nation. It is as the "carrier" of the "shared stories" formed in the shifting and evolving landscapes of Lakewood's "community of memory" that Waldie has found his purpose, "the ability, the grace, to think of myself as a teller of stories about the place where I live" ("15 Minutes" 49). As he writes, "The critics of suburbs say that you and I live narrow lives. I agree. My life is narrow. From one perspective or another, all our lives are narrow. Only when lives are placed side by side do they seem larger" (*Holy* 94).
- 26 As we read *Holy Land*, this is the experience; of lives and stories juxtaposed, side by side, building layer upon layer within the intersecting streets of a community constantly evolving and yet, in some important ways, remaining constant and eternal. The word he uses at one point is "interleaving" (*Holy* 3), as if to deliberately invoke once again both the organic process of overlapping growth and the bookish metaphor that reminds us of how these suburban streets, for all their apparent ordinariness, are like the text itself with each section a new "leaf" combining with others new and old forming a complex, spectral document, "the leavings of many deaths" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 84).

## 5. Becoming the Grid

- 27 These interleaving "lives ... placed side by side" suggest the second example of Waldie's argument with conventional or mythic perceptions of suburbia, here contained in the trope of the grid with its containing influence on both geography and ideology. William L. Fox writes that the grid system of mapping and land division in the West "lead us to believe that we understand where we are" and helped "create a series of assumptions" about possession built around the visual control gridding appears to supply. This "cartographic imperative is a direct corollary to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which ... held that the land was ours for the taking," providing a "cocoon" of "customary perceptual protocols" through which we contain the landscape (Fox 61-62).
- 28 Like Fox, cultural geographer J. Brinckerhoff Jackson argues the grid system's "perceptual protocols" were "imprinted at the moment of conception on every American child" constructing a type of spatial, national narrative: "It is this grid, not the eagle or the stars and stripes," he wrote, "which is our true national emblem," representing an "overpowering," "all-pervading sameness," and "ignoring all inherent differences" (Jackson, *Sense* 153, 154).
- 29 Waldie, however, refuses to accept such negative definitions and prefers instead to look inside the grid itself, "unpacking" it as what he calls a "compass of possibilities" ("15 Minutes" 6; *Holy* 4-5). In so doing, he records its layers, both positive and negative, seeing within the grid both something that "opens outward without limits" as well as "the anxieties" it creates (*Holy* 118-19). Throughout the text, this is manifested historically as he charts the Western associations with the grid from 1781 and Colonel Felipe de Neve, governor of Spanish California, establishing Los Angeles, through President Jefferson's Land Ordinance of 1785 determining the western lands, to the railroads use of the "familiar and cheap" (*Holy* 70) pattern in their towns, to the very street systems of Lakewood, and still further, beyond that, to how *within* the houses themselves the shape

is reflected in the "grids of three rectangles" (*Holy* 24) that form the bathroom door panels behind which his father dies of tachycardia.

- 30 This telescoping of experience, putting stories side by side, is typical of Waldie's approach throughout *Holy Land*; finding a comfort in the recurrent patterns others criticise as standardization. Yet, as a critical regionalist, Waldie's book also moves outward to reflect upon the grid design as ever-present historically; from Vitruvius to Joseph Smith's Mormon plan for the city of Zion in 1833, to the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Not missing the ironies, Waldie notes the parallel of Birkenau (Birch Wood) to Lakewood, both "scientifically planned" (*Holy* 100), and further, the fact that it was a suburb built by Jewish entrepreneurs – men who could not, given the racist post-war property covenants, actually live in the houses they built. Good and bad, restrictive, comforting, and liberating, the grid – "as regular as any thought of God's" – emphasised the "charmed pattern of our lives" in all their rich ordinariness (*Holy* 48, 60), with all their stories of sin, loss, vulnerability, death and redemption "placed side by side" and coexisting within it. In isolation or silence the risk is that these stories are overlooked or disregarded my many, the grid being "just a pattern repeating itself" (*Holy* 6) rather than containing something vital and engaging, like Waldie's "immanent in the everyday" ("Ordinary Time" 62).
- 31 Indeed, as the opening of *Holy Land* suggests, Waldie's intention was to present a more human, affective relationship to the soulless appearance and reputation of the grid: "That evening he thought he was becoming his habits, or – even more – he thought he was becoming the grid he knew" (*Holy* 1). The author, here referred to as "he," absorbs the grid into himself, just as the book itself metaphorically *embodies* the shape of the grid with its 316 sections (some long, some short) intersecting and juxtaposing across its pages; fragments and layers that together, like the lives within the gridded streets he investigates, create a story to challenge the normative mythology with its "necessary illusion [of] predictability" (*Holy* 2). As he writes, "The grid limited our choices, exactly as urban planners said it would. But the limits weren't paralyzing" (*Holy* 116). To an extent it "compelled a conviviality" by bringing people closer together and became a "substitute for choices" as they learned to live in proximity with one another as if embodying the possibilities of the grid itself (*Holy* 116). The genealogist in Waldie constructs a text made up by "interleaving" stories of the personal and public, the social and historical, and the inner and outer and, in so doing, asks "how we construct our own histories through memory ... how we position ourselves within wider, more public, histories" that these suburbs and their people inevitably touch (Kuhn 243). For all its faults, Waldie embraces the grid, recognising within it a comforting sense of location and belonging: "There are an indefinite number of beginnings and endings on the grid, but you are always somewhere" (*Holy* 116).
- 32 In this meditation on the grid, Waldie renegotiates a sense of "locality" or region close to the definition offered by Doreen Massey:  
constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus ... articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings ... constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself ... And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local. (Massey 154-55)

- 33 Rejecting the rootedness of "some long, internalized history" Massey favours a progressive "extroverted" sense of place unthreatened by its connections beyond itself, what she terms "a global sense of the local, a global sense of place" (Massey 154-56).
- 34 Although this seems far removed from the concerns of Waldie's suburbs, in fact *Holy Land* is far from an inward-looking, local text, for it shows how the deep stories of the grid are always simultaneously interleaved with regional, national, and international histories: the consequences of wars (both World War II and Vietnam), the Atomic Age, the processes of migrational, racial, and demographic shifts into and out of the New West; the development of a military-industrial complex as the life-blood of the Sun Belt economies (Lakewood is an aerospace suburb in part built to service the workers at South Bay and Long Beach); and the dramatic ecological changes written on the very landscape of suburbia. Through these examples, Waldie locates Lakewood within a Western matrix of environmental and political change like the work of Mike Davis, a writer he admires, and yet the significant difference between them is the latter's "hardline and ominous" portrayal of LA's decline in contrast to what Waldie himself terms his "skeptical optimism" born of a mixture of faith civics and Catholicism (Soja, *Postmetropolis* 302; Waldie, *Where* 27).

## 6. The Anti-Mike Davis

- 35 In *Holy Land* and elsewhere, Waldie criticises "theorists and critics," like Peter Blake in *God's Own Junkyard* (1964) and James Howard Kunstler in *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) because their portrayals of suburbia have fixed its image in the popular imagination as a desolate wasteland. His point is that once defined, these writers "did not look again" to see what had changed or how people lived their lives within such spaces (*Holy* 6). He explains this at length in a later interview:

Beginning in the late-1940s with the development of Levittown and continuing all the way until today, there's a certain puritan strain in American culture that is contemptuous of, furious with, suburban places. There's a writer, James Howard Kunstler, who wrote *Geography of Nowhere* and several other books, and he's one of the polemicists for the New Urbanism. A few years ago he entitled a keynote speech to the assembled New Urbanist followers, "The Place Where Evil Dwells." And he was talking about places like Lakewood. That enormous weight of contempt and fury and disappointment and regret about suburban places meant that a book like *Holy Land* had to be a – had to stealthily make its way in a world where those views predominate. It's not a standard memoir. ("15 Minutes" 8)

- 36 In a continuation of this argument with urban theorists, Waldie has taken on the leading figure of its new generation, Mike Davis, author of *City of Quartz* (1990), *Ecology of Fear* (1998), and *Dead Cities* (2002). In these books Davis has presented a powerful and influential set of arguments about the American West in crisis, suffering from the combined effects of profligate economic, environmental, and political decisions that have turned the region from sunshine state of hope and promise to the "random surreality" of a "junkyard of dreams" (Davis, *City* 434-35). Waldie acknowledges Davis's central role in bringing a "conversation" about LA to "national prominence" in *City of Quartz* and, although he "disagrees[s] with him" on many issues, recognises it was Davis who "made [his] part in [the dialogue] possible" (Waldie, *Where* 26). Waldie's now famous review of Davis' *Ecology of Fear* originally published in *Salon*, September 1998, demonstrates a further way in which *Holy Land* "had to stealthily" refute certain established positions

about the urban West. Davis's book begins by describing Los Angeles as "a Book of the Apocalypse theme park" riddled by disasters, both man-made and natural (Davis, *Ecology* 7), and concludes with a representatively apocalyptic summary:

Seen from space, the city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints now dazzles observers with the eerie beauty of an erupting volcano. (422)

37 This vision, of what Waldie calls a "combo-apocalypse" for California, "fetishizes" its fictional Armageddons producing "a pornography of despair" like "the demonic double" of those original "booster pitches" who promoted the Inland Empire as the land of "health and happiness in the sunshine" (Waldie, "Pornography"). Such an extreme position is, according to Waldie, "so dismal that it's ultimately paralyzing," inviting "our contempt for its subject," marginalising blue collar lives to produce "a kind of terrorist manifesto against the durability of ordinary things," as Waldie puts it (Waldie, "Pornography"). Key to Waldie's argument with Davis is the "amnesia" demonstrated in his failure to seek out "alternative stories of the city," as he had done in his first book *City of Quartz*, or to actually consider those "who live here" (Waldie, "Pornography"). To ignore these stories is to erase a vital history of suburban resilience amongst "people who've taken up the protracted burdens of conviviality" and achieved their "small victories over fear in living together" ("Pornography"). Of course, these are the very stories Waldie tells in all his writings, like those born of LA's St Agatha's Church with its multicultural community reflecting "a kind of *mestizaje*" – not a "New Jerusalem but the sort of everyday community that accommodates their weakness and their longing," or as the preacher there Ken Deasy puts it succinctly, "People are coming to this area and discovering it's a holy land" (qtd. in Waldie, "Pornography").

38 However, according to Waldie, Davis fails to see this everydayness and concludes, "that no story of our lives together can resist the perfect catastrophes" of LA that he records ("Pornography"), and it so represents an antithesis to his own writing, which as I have shown, sets out the "compass of possibilities" contained in the most, apparently, unpromising suburban landscapes and expressed through the most ordinary lives. The stories he tells are like lost "snapshots" found again, "acts of resistance against official amnesia" giving voice to forgotten lives, for, after all, says Waldie, "We're like snapshots. What we hunger for is remembrance" (Waldie, *Close* 11). As Waldie puts it,

Where I live is one of the places where suburban stories were first mass-produced. They were stories then for displaced Okies and Arkies, Jews who knew the pain of exclusion, Catholics who thought they did, and anyone white with a steady job. Today, the same stories begin here, except the anxious people who tell them are completely mixed in their colors and ethnicities. I continue to live here because I want to find out what happens next in stories I think I already know. (Waldie, "An Excerpt")

39 In his contribution to the film *Los Angeles Now* (directed by Philip Rodriguez, 2005) Waldie adds to these sentiments by saying, "We don't have all the materials at hand yet to even begin assembling a shared narrative of Los Angeles, but we probably need to begin to listen to more stories and listen hard for them" (Waldie, *Los Angeles Now*).

## 7. Conclusion: "the burden and gift" of Place

40 As so often in Waldie's work one can look to his Catholicism for answers, for as he wrote, "My 'sense of place' is based on the belief that each of us has an imaginative, inner

landscape compounded of memory and longing that seeks to be connected to an outer landscape of people, circumstances, and things" (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 62). This emphasis on *sense* "enmeshes the ghostly and the definite," as he puts it, drawing in from his experience of the suburbs, "like the Word being made flesh," all its material and immaterial elements and stories, until what emerges is a "dialog, a continuous narrative within and without, that I understand to be prayer. Because my imagination inclines to being analogical, habitual, communitarian, and commonplace, I assume that's Catholic" (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 63). In a corresponding and beautiful moment in *Holy Land*, he writes, "When I walk to work, thinking of these stories, they seem insignificant. At Mass on Sunday, I remember them as prayers" (*Holy* 111).

- 41 The suburb is "just the body into which I welcome myself," says Waldie, whereby notions of community and communion, stories and prayers, religion and civics interfuse so all things are imbued with the presence of God. Unlike Mike Davis, for whom LA has been transformed by corporatism, greed, and racial tension into an apocalyptic junkyard, Waldie writes, "In the Catholic imagination, the Holy haunts the everyday" and, therefore, for him suburbia becomes a kind of Holy Land re-born out of fire and forgetfulness, "a brown city .... The northernmost city of the tropics" – an "impure mestizo city" (Waldie, *Where* 21; Waldie, "Necessary" part 3).
- 42 Waldie's identity emerges through his relationship to place, just as place forms from its dialogic relations with people; for as he says, "he has written [himself] into the story of [his] community and attempted to negotiate [his] way from the personal to the public" (Waldie, "Ordinary Time" 65). To do this, Waldie has created a unique form of critical regionalist text involving the hybridization of materiality and sensibility, yet one always already entwined with spirituality, since, as he writes, "The everyday isn't perfect. It confines some and leads some astray into contempt or nostalgia, but it saves others. I live where I live in California because the weight of my everyday life here is a burden I want to carry" ("An Ordinary Place" n.p.). Through recognising and recording this "burden," like the image of crucifixion that haunts *Holy Land* from beginning to end, he constructs an *expanded* critical regionalism at the forefront of American Western Cultural Studies, appreciating the local in the context of the wider world, the inner with the outer, the material with the immaterial, the "Christic" with the civic, seeing how even in the most disregarded and ordinary places love, care, and redemption might still be possible. In the words of Kathleen Stewart, "Potentiality is a thing immanent to fragments of sensory experience and dreams of presence. A layer, or layering to the ordinary, it engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things" (Stewart 21). How appropriate it is then, that *Holy Land* concludes at Easter, juxtaposing religious rituals of sacrifice and atonement with the civic and community care that Waldie espouses, clearly linking the obligations and responsibilities of faith with his view of properly sustained suburban duties. "There was," he writes, "no distinction about who could participate in the veneration of the cross," and in his memory the Easter Mass merges with the secular gathering of suburbia until the words of the hymn *Pange Lingua* take on another meaning as relevant to the struggles and trials of suburban family life in Lakewood as to the death and resurrection of Christ: "Sweet the wood / Sweet the nails / Sweet the weight you bear" (*Holy* 178-79).
- 43 Curiously, Waldie claimed in 1999, when answering an *LA Times* round-robin on the question "L.A. Lit (Does it Exist?)," that, "The literature to come isn't here yet" (Waldie, "L.A. Lit"). However, I cannot help thinking that he is too modest and that his affective

memoirs of person and place with their passionate breadth and emotive depth points us towards new forms of expanded critical regionalism invested with a complex and resonant "compass of possibilities" derived from an intense relationship to the everyday and an "investment in the unfolding of things" (Stewart 21). For as Waldie has written elsewhere, "To be a citizen of Los Angeles means, in this hour, not to dream but to pick up the burden and gift of bearing witness to this place" (Waldie, "Necessary" 6).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article uses the works of the writer, memoirist, and Lakewood, California public official, D. J. Waldie to deepen our concept of "region" and to re-assess many of the stereotypical discourses associated with the American suburbs. In the fashionable parlance of Mike Davis' *City of Quartz*, Los Angeles has become defined by its "suburban badlands"; however, Waldie's work takes a different view in which his suburban home in LA is the focus for a more complex, multi-faceted approach to post-war suburbia. Typified by his re-assessment of the suburban grid as a "compass of possibilities," his writings encourage a more nuanced and layered view of the communities and cultures fostered in such places. His key work *Holy Land* is an argument about why a disregarded place, an ordinary place like suburbia, can in fact contain qualities of life that are profound and reassuring. Through examining his work in its cultural and theoretical context this article looks below the expected "grid" of suburbia to demonstrate the rich life beyond its apparent anonymity.

## INDEX

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